

## Indigenous peoples and the British Empire in Australia

Article (Published Version)

Lester, Alan (2015) Indigenous peoples and the British Empire in Australia. *British Politics Review*, 10 (1). pp. 7-8. ISSN 1890-4505

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/52961/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.



# British Politics Review

*Journal of the British Politics Society, Norway*

Volume 10 | No. 1 | Winter 2015



## Views from Australia

Perspectives on the British-Australian  
relationship

### CONTRIBUTORS

Callum McEachern • Alan Lester • Benjamin T. Jones  
Nick Dyrenfurth • Tony Burton • Frank Bongiorno

## **British Politics Review**

Volume 10 | No. 1 | Winter 2015

ISSN 1890-4505

**British Politics Review** is a quarterly journal issued by the British Politics Society, Norway. With contributions from academic and journalistic sources, the *British Politics Review* is aimed at everyone with a general interest in political developments in Britain.

**British Politics Society, Norway** is politically neutral and has no collective agenda apart from raising the interest and knowledge of British politics among the informed Norwegian public.

### **Editorial team**

Øivind Bratberg [Editor]

Kristin M. Haugevik [Associate Editor]

Atle L. Wold [Associate Editor]

Henry Allen

### **Postal address**

P.O. Box 6 Blindern

N-0313 Oslo, Norway

### **Email**

mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

### **Website**

www.britishpoliticsociety.no

### **Print**

Reprosentralen, Oslo, Norway

### **Cover photo**

David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, and the Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Brisbane, 14 November 2014. Crown Copyright. Photo: Arron Hoare [Published under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Generic Licence].

### **Manuscripts**

Within a relatively broad framework, *British Politics Review* welcomes articles on British politics and society, preferably related to the thematic area set for each issue (announced in the previous issue and on our website). Please contact the editors at mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

### **Subscriptions**

100 NOK pr year

Please contact us at

mail@britishpoliticsociety.no

or visit our website.

## **Editorial**

# **Australia and western civilisation - then and now**

On 25 April this year, Australians and New Zealanders will mark the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign during the First World War. It was the quintessential example of soldiers from 'down under' laying down their lives for the British Empire in a war fought on the other side of the globe. Today, the remit of ANZAC day has widened to commemorate all citizens of the two countries that have served and died in military conflicts abroad. Its original disposition, however, was to commemorate the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps that fought at Gallipoli.

The date 25 April was officially named ANZAC Day in 1916, a year after the landing at the Gallipoli peninsula. Allied forces were seeking to establish a naval pathway to the Black Sea and, in a longer perspective, to defeat the Ottoman Empire in its own heart, Constantinople. The campaign turned to be drawn-out and costly, resulting in evacuation by the end of the year following heavy casualties. But the contribution by Australians and New Zealanders became the source of a legend which is vibrant to this day. It is a legend that portrays the two countries as guardians of liberal democracy and western civilisation, at the same time as it confirms their historical relationship to Britain.

A century later, Australia finds itself at a crossroads regarding its national identity and self-perception. What is its position in the world, and what should it be? Australia is a parliamentary democracy that retains Britain's monarch as its head of state. As a ceremonial homage to its former imperial centre, Queen Elizabeth II remains the Queen of Australia. Institutional bonds remain, and they are honoured not only on historical grounds but for political reasons too. Australia seems to lack the confidence to find a more independent place in the world, Callum McEachern argues elsewhere on these pages. While geographically, Australia is far from the western civilisation of Europe and North America, its geopolitical reference points remain Britain and the United States.

In the present issue of *British Politics Review* we offer a number of different perspectives on the British-Australian relationship, historically and today. Tracing the roots of the multifaceted relationship also helps explain its nature today, ranging from political parties and ideologies via the position of the Aboriginal people to the prestige and position of the monarchy. While a century has passed since Gallipoli, the sense of a value-based commitment to a common past lingers on, but in a different environment. Might the coming century bring other orientations quietly to the fore?

*Øivind Bratberg and Atle L. Wold (editors)*

## **Contents**

Australia and New Zealand: displaced narratives and the centennial ANZAC day <i>Callum McEachern</i>	pp. 3-4	A knight's tale: Australian Conservatism <i>Frank Bongiorno</i>	pp. 9-11
Australia and the British monarchy: lingering on? <i>Benjamin T. Jones</i>	pp. 5-6	The early Australian Labor Party: leading from the front? <i>Nick Dyrenfurth</i>	pp. 12-13
Indigenous people and the British Empire in Australia <i>Alan Lester</i>	pp. 7-8	A flagging relationship? <i>Tony Burton</i>	pp. 14-16

# Australia and New Zealand: displaced narratives and the centennial ANZAC day

By Callum McEachern

Unlike neutral Norway, World War 1 severely interrupted the building of distinctive 'place-based' national identities in Australia and New Zealand. In the decades prior to Gallipoli, literature and arts were forging closer relationships between the land, political ideals and national visions. People relished the prospects of shaping their self-image free from the privileges of semi-feudal Britain and America's heritage of bloody independence and civil wars.



*Callum McEachern is a Post Doctoral Researcher in geography at the University of Tasmania, Hobart. He worked on Australia's Centenary of Federation in 2001*

Instead, despite living on the edge of 'the ocean of peace' (The Pacific), national identity became shaped by sacrifice on northern hemisphere battlefields. Ever since there has been a quiet sense of muted, maybe arrested, development of national narratives; a situation extended by globalisation of English-speaking cultures.

Every new nation seeks recognition and respect on the world stage. Although our natural elements of place encouraged prowess in sport, inventiveness and the arts, the desire to quickly prove self-worth and forge collective identity led to a war zone. It is an enigma that Australians, and to lesser extent New Zealanders, continue to allow their national narratives to be shaped elsewhere and adopt a role in world affairs akin to more militaristic and jingoistic cultures. Despite shared characteristics with Norwegians, we passed up the opportunity to be consistent, independent peacemakers in world, as Norway has done since Fridtjof Nansen's post WW1 efforts.

The original fear of being the isolated 'white tribes of Asia' has resulted in a sense of insecurity that is not clearly articulated, especially by Australian politicians. In dealings with northern hemisphere powers, the desire for reaffirmation of respect has led to a self-image based on 'punching above our weight'. It allows us to be flattered at a Texan barbeque and turn the F-35 strike fighter into a 'flying open cheque book'. As some defence analysts suggest, the new focus on weapons designed for deployment far from home (including armed drones), is being quarantined from the current intense economic debate. It is as if we wish to be protected from knowing too much.

The trauma of the 'baptism of fire' on Turkey's Gallipoli beach deeply impacted the Australian and New Zealander psyche. Unknown by most Australians, New Zealand lost far more lives per capita and has been more cautious about war ever since. After Gallipoli enthusiasm for the war ebbed early and in two referenda Australians rejected

conscription. With the 'national romanticism' that had boosted self-confidence now waning, all that remained was courageous survival and mateship. Officially this became the 'ANZAC spirit'; a story of endurance as much as bravery. It filled the void of a national narrative being 'nipped in the bud'.

The ANZAC 'legend' was actually based on the attributes and values emerging from real life experiences on home soil - in 'the bush' - hostile landscapes like Australia's vast dry interior and New Zealand's rugged mountains. Survival required cooperation, fairness and honesty, which encouraged egalitarianism. This vision of democratic nations based on environmental influences and 'virtues of necessity' was expressed effectively by poets. One was a son of a Norwegian sailor, Henry Lawson, the other, Banjo Patterson, whose ballad 'Waltzing Matilda' became the unofficial national anthem. It is an emotional and semi-spiritual lament of struggle against vested powers, ending in death. The 'emptiness' is reinforced by Australia's failure, unlike New Zealand, to fully accept that the land was home to people when Europeans arrived. The Australian Constitution still does not recognise Indigenous peoples, despite the proof that they served at Gallipoli.

When, on Australia Day this year, Prime Minister Abbott gave the nation's highest honour - a knighthood - to the husband of the British monarch, he dismayed Australians and bewildered New Zealanders. A century after apparent independence, political and cultural cringe to both English aristocracy and deference to the US, haunts national identity. The lack of confidence to find a more independent place in the world reflects self-doubt in political decision-making and it disturbs many. What has changed since the first ANZACs were controlled from Whitehall?

There is widespread unease that Hollywood-style 'patriotic' fervour for war heroes is being encouraged by government and some media. A day before PM Abbott's British deference, the top country musician warned that Gallipoli should not be about flag-waving but reflection on 'a national tragedy'. A few 'patriots' then suggested this 'boy from the bush' was too sentimental about peace.

In his official 2014 ANZAC day speech, the widely respected late Governor of Tasmania (the British Queen's representative) Peter Underwood, called for a 'year of peace' to commemorate Gallipoli. Although he made no reference to the Middle East, hard-line conservative politicians attacked him for being 'pro-Palestine'. It shone light on a context that is rarely discussed, although retired senior Labour party figures are concerned that the 'Israeli government lobby' now has excessive influence over foreign policy.



This is the paradox of the 'war on terror'. Not only is a new wave of theocracy weakening secular democracies and nation states in the Middle East, it is impacting closer to home. With attention on the rise of radical Islam, overall geo-political tensions are being fuelled further by extremist elements within the other two religions that share the heritage of the Old Testament. Ultra-orthodox Jews and the mainly US-based 'neo Christians' also share another belief with radical Islamists

– Armageddon – prophesised destruction of the world as a means to an end.

The spread of hard-line fundamentalism into political ideology has been noticeable across the English-speaking world. Religious rhetoric is influencing public policies through online 'debates' increasingly characterised by hate, intolerance and fear. Yet US citizen Murdoch, who dominates Australian media, considers any criticism of Judeo-Christian extremists to be taboo.

Most of the new 'micro' parties also communicate implied or explicit Islamic-phobia and have high-jacked the national flag symbols. Globally-networked 'identity politics' is translating ancient theology into ideology. Ironically, even new US-style libertarian parties ignore the risk of theocracies eroding democracies.

Unresolved geo-political tensions of the Middle East have stalked the ANZAC story for a hundred years. WW1 did not install western 'civilisation' nor peace in the region. One beneficial consequence in the wake of the war was the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a secular Turkish state; a nation now pivotal in confronting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. However, failure to implement the 1917 Balfour Declaration calling for both Palestinian and Jewish states has continued to block a possible path to peaceful co-existence. Moreover, Britain alongside western powers has found it impractical to honour the ideas of liberal democracy and national self-determination that the war propagandised to favour.

Back home, the accelerating polarisation of domestic politics along new sectarian lines will only increase Australian sense of insecurity. Strained relations with



"The Last Post" is played at an ANZAC Day ceremony in Port Melbourne, Victoria, 25 April 2005. The trumpet call is used at Commonwealth military funerals and ceremonies commemorating those who have been killed in war.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, require governments to take citizens into confidence and build understanding of complex issues; something that did not happen with the Vietnam or Iraq wars. US suggestions that Australia may have to choose loyalty between it and Asia (especially China) only adds to anxieties about the realities of place. However, New Zealand has long identified itself as a South Pacific nation. In doing so, it also learned the lessons

that distant allies can readily forgo mutual defence obligations, if something like 'nuclear free' upsets them.

New Zealand is so comfortable with its place in the world, that conservatives support the quest for a distinctive new flag. The silver fern on a black background, long identified with kiwi sport, is likely. But the Aussie sporting equivalent, the green and gold wattle seems destined never to replace the red, white and blue of the Union Jack. It is literally a 'security blanket', sharing the colours of the stars and stripes, and in turn exclusive 'shared values'.

Since Gallipoli, Australia and NZ have had little time and space to reassess their role as 'ready allies'. The unprecedented invasion of Iraq disturbed Australia's Returned Services League but after invoking 'ANZAC loyalty', the policy decision was successfully 'hidden behind the troops' and public opinion softened. It appears that the ANZAC narrative is too easily appropriated.

How ANZAC will be commemorated on April 25 after 100 years will provide an insight into the nations' capacities for critical reflection beyond emotional symbolism. The sacredness of ANZAC may mean we are reluctant to do so. If so, the 'national tragedy' could haunt us further.

In 2002, when the last ANZAC, Alec Campbell, died, the Tasmanian capital's streets fell silent. We sensed the sunshine and bird calls that fresh morning in a moment of deep, deep emotion. As with all ANZAC survivors, Alec had only spoken of the horrors of war and the need to pursue peace. The link to real reflection passed with him. In this era of fast, fragile communication, 'Lest We Forget'.

# Australia and the British monarchy: lingering on?

By Benjamin T. Jones

On 22 August 1770, Captain James Cook climbed the highest peak of Possession Island and 'in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast'. This was the formal beginning of the relationship between Australia and the British monarchy. With Cook's declaration and the celebratory firing of 'three Volleys of small arms' the ancestral home of some 500 Indigenous clans became Crown Land. With the arrival of the First Fleet on 26 January 1788, this theoretical dispossession became reality for the Eora people who lived in the Sydney basin.



Benjamin T. Jones is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the University of Western Sydney. His books include *Republicanism and Responsible Government* (MQUP, 2014) and *Project Republic* (Black Inc, 2013).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the monarchy was a powerful symbol for the white colonists. Lacking the ancient connection to the land that marked the Aborigines, the new Australians found in the monarchy a vital source of cultural identity. After her ascension in 1837, the rapidly developing Eastern seaboard had endless enthusiasm for honouring their young Queen. Separated from New South Wales in 1851 and 1859 respectively, Victoria and Queensland were both named in honour of the British monarch. Streets, schools, theatres, hospitals and other buildings throughout Australia were all eponymously named for Queen Victoria and the trend has continued for all her successors.

It was not until 1954 that a reigning monarch would set foot on the soil claimed 184 years earlier. Queen Elizabeth II's royal tour met with jubilant crowds. Prime Minister Robert Menzies typified the national sentiment when he famously declared, 'I did but see her passing by and yet I love her till I die'. The Queen was (and perhaps still is) the very symbol of Britishness and for

a nation that identified as Australian Britons, her visit sparked excitement rarely seen before or since.

Despite this outpouring of emotion, just a decade later, two powerful voices began a national conversation that has not yet been resolved. Donald Horne's now iconic text, *The Lucky Country* (1964), and Geoffrey Dutton's collection of essays, *Australia and the Monarchy* (1966), both dared to ask if the Queen was still a viable symbol of the Australian people. The 1960s was a perfect time to ask such a question. Economically, Britain had turned away from Australia and was preparing to join the European Economic Community. Militaristically, Britain had been replaced by the United States as Australia's powerful ally. Culturally, Australians began to think of themselves as an independent people.

Prime ministerial rhetoric soon caught up with changing public sentiment. At the outbreak of World War I, Andrew Fisher promised that Australia would defend Britain to the 'last man and last shilling'. Menzies proudly described himself as 'British to the bootstraps'. By the 1960s this had all changed. With the Vietnam War as a backdrop, Harold Holt built on John Curtin's 'look to America' speech and declared the nation would go 'all the way with LBJ'. John Gorton intentionally contrasted Menzies by calling himself, 'Australian to the boot heels'.

Australia continued to slowly replace the imperial symbols that once held pride of place in the national psyche. In 1975 the Order of Australia replaced the British awards system. With the slow demise of Empire Day in the 1960s, Australia Day became the focus of national celebrations. God Save the Queen was finally replaced with Advance Australia Fair

in 1984 and the Australia Acts of 1986 cut the last legislative ties between Australia and the British parliament.

The last formal and constitutional link between Australia and Britain was the monarchy which still provided Australia with a head of state.



Mosaic picture of Queen Elizabeth II, produced by Helen Marshall using more than 5,000 photos of people in celebration of the Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Towner Gallery in Eastbourne, England. The Queen is Head of State in 16 of the 53 member states in the Commonwealth of Nations, including Australia.



During the 1988 Bicentennial, Prince Charles and Princess Diana were the focal point of the national gaze. The Queen also visited to open the new parliament building with then opposition leader, John Howard, remarking that she was the 'pinnacle of our democracy'. That Australia's most significant national celebration since Federation was dominated by British Royalty irked many and a formal republican movement was born.

Initially led by author Thomas Keneally but soon driven by Malcolm Turnbull, the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) was launched on 7 July 1991 with the stated aim of achieving a republic by 2001, the centenary of Federation. The governing Labor Party, led by Paul Keating, gave its full support to the mission. Keating was defeated by conservative and monarchist, John Howard in 1996, but support for a republic continued to grow. Polls in the late 1990s indicate that public support for a republic was strong with results varying from mid-60s and low 70s. Despite this, the public were split on what kind of republic. The Labor Party and ARM supported a minimalist model where the Queen would be replaced by an Australian president. Like the Queen, the President would be a ceremonial figurehead, selected by a 2/3 majority of parliament. Reformist republicans insisted on change of a larger scale with a President directly voted for by the public. The schism proved great enough that prominent reformist republicans joined the official No team and campaigned against the referendum.

The day of the referendum, 6 November 1999, coincided with the Rugby World Cup final in Cardiff. Australia's Wallabies were triumphant but the referendum failed, securing 45 percent of the popular vote. The front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* showed the Queen presenting Australian captain and staunch republican John Eales with the Webb Ellis Cup with the caption, 'your cup, my country'. There was no second referendum with a direct-election model and, despite a general feeling that a republic would eventually happen, the status quo has seemed secure since.

The monarchy in Australia has proved remarkably adaptable. It was once seen as a unifying force, a symbol of the nation above the mire of partisan politics. This is clearly no longer the case. Even among monarchists, few would argue that the Queen is a relevant symbol of modern Australia. The monarchy has largely retreated from public view in Australia. While visits from the Queen and especially the media-friendly Prince William, Catherine and baby George, are still newsworthy events, they soon fade into the background. The arguments used by the No camp before the referendum did not highlight the merits of monarchy but the stability of the system and the potential problems with a republican model.

Australia's last two prime ministers have both been republicans but neither Kevin Rudd nor Julia Gillard made any attempt to further the cause. Gillard even renamed a prominent Canberran street after the Queen that had

formally honoured Sir Henry Parkes, Australia's Father of Federation. Treasurer Wayne Swan and Malcolm Turnbull attempted to breathe new life into the movement by endorsing a collection of essays titled *Project Republic* in 2013 but little else has been done. Australia's current Prime Minister, Tony Abbott is the former head of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy and has written two books arguing against a republic. Shortly after his election in 2013 he reinstated knights and dames to Australia despite anticipating ridicule. With Prince Harry in Sydney for the naval fleet review, he apologised that Australians were not all monarchists. At his swearing in, Abbott reversed the trend of Labor Prime Ministers and swore allegiance to the Queen rather than to the Australian people. While Abbott's devotion to the monarchy is clear, it does not reflect the Australian mood or even the sentiment of his own party which is split on the issue.

Ever since radical Scottish preacher Dr John Dunmore Lang declared an Australian republic to be a great 'coming event' in the mid-nineteenth century, it has been assumed, in Australia and Britain, that it is inevitable. This sense of destiny has perhaps removed any urgency. In principle, most agree that an Australian should be the Australian Head of State but the old adage 'if it aint broke, don't fix it' has proven tenacious.

Mark McKenna's excellent work, *The Captive Republic*, remains the authoritative history of republicanism in Australia. The republic indeed is like a captive bird although the cage door is open. It only awaits the motivation to fly. Many agree with former Prime Minister Bob Hawke, that the end of the Queen's reign will be the catalyst for republican change. It is true that Prince Charles does not command the same respect as his mother but the issue is likely more nuanced than relative popularity. Australia has slid into a comfortable coexistence with the British monarchy. With an unwritten convention that the King or Queen will never use their considerable reserve powers to interfere with national politics, many are happy or at least indifferent with the present arrangement. As a politically neutral Head of State, the monarchy is sometimes seen as a mere reminder of Australia's imperial past. The prospect of King Charles gracing every Australian coin will spark discussion but it is unlikely to bring about a republic.

Australians have historically not had to think about national symbols as they were simply inherited from the mother country. While post-colonialism saw many nations hurriedly remove the Union Jack from their flags, it is a cause Australians have shown little interest in. Since the turn of the twentieth century visit of French writer, Albert Mélin, Australians have been characterised as a practical people, more interested in the functionality than ideology of politics. Without some new impetus to cause national introspection and a new conversation on identity, the monarchy will continue to find a place in the Australian constitution if not the minds and hearts of the people.

# Indigenous peoples and the British Empire in Australia

By Alan Lester

In the Northern Territory of Australia today a government intervention, prompted by high rates of alcoholism and child abuse within Aboriginal communities, is causing a storm of controversy. At issue is whether the state has the right to dictate what welfare payments may be spent on (not on pornography or alcohol, for instance), to what extent those communities may govern themselves, and who provides services to them. Underlying these issues is a broader question with a much longer history. Are Aboriginal people to be protected from themselves and others by the state, or should they be considered autonomous and self-reliant communities? Should descendants of the original inhabitants of Australia be integrated with those of more recent immigrants, or should they be encouraged to live in splendid isolation?



Alan Lester is Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex. His latest book is with Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines Across the Nineteenth Century British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

This debate in Australia was one facet of a much broader debate, waged across and beyond the British Empire as a whole. It related to Native Americans, First Nations, southern Africans and Maori as well as Australian Aboriginal people. It first came to a head in Australia and in the other colonies where Britons emigrated *en masse*, in the late 1830s. Two incidents crystallised the debate. In the rapidly expanding colony of New South Wales, seven British settlers, engaged in the business of 'clearing the land' for sheep farming, were hanged in 1838 for the murder of twenty eight Aboriginal people at Myall Creek. At the same time, in the extension of the colony known then as the Port Phillip District (now the state of Victoria), and in South Australia and Western Australia in different forms too, the British government established a new office to oversee colonization – the Protectorate of Aborigines. Both events manifested the British government's belief that colonization could be reconciled with humanity, indeed accomplished with benefit to Indigenous peoples. Both events brought to a head a growing tension among British colonists and their supporters 'at home'.

Broadly, these tensions reflected a clash between missionary and humanitarian-inspired ideas of colonization on the one hand, and those espoused by the emigrant settlers undertaking the 'work' of Indigenous dispossession on

the other. The former were convinced that Providence had awarded the British with an unprecedentedly vast empire so that they could Christianise and 'civilize' its inhabitants. The missionary press, evangelical ministers and officials and many among the growing British middle classes sustained this view. For the emigrants and their supporters, though, wherever Indigenous peoples stood in the way of 'settlement' and 'progress', it was legitimate to remove or overawe them, rather than seek to integrate them. Different ideas of racial difference underpinned each notion. For humanitarians, Indigenous peoples, including even Australia's supposedly especially backward peoples, were innocents awaiting salvation through the light of God and instruction in civilization. For many settlers and their sympathisers in Britain, they were inherently savage, incapable of ever being assimilated into a modern, progressive society. By the late-nineteenth century most Britons assumed that these were 'dying races', doomed to disappear from the Earth through the natural processes of Darwinian selection.

So, when the settlers responsible for the Myall Creek massacre were hanged (the only such instance of white men ever being executed for the murder of Aboriginal people), there was celebration among humanitarians that at last, the civilizing mission of empire was being taken seriously by the state. Humanitarian celebration was matched by settler outrage that civilised men should be punished for speeding up an inevitable process.

If the Myall Creek case aroused the ire of many settlers, the establishment of the Protectorate induced panic. Four men were appointed as Deputies under a Chief Protector. The man chosen for that job was the controversial George Augustus Robinson. His humanitarian sympathisers at the time saw him as the man who had just rescued the remnants of Van Diemen's Land's (Tasmania's) Aboriginal population from annihilation at the hands of colonists during the colony's Black War. His subsequent detractors have portrayed him as the architect of genocide, having condemned the Aboriginal survivors to a slow and painful demise through disease and neglect on the barren, windswept Flinders Island, to which he negotiated their exile. Serving under Robinson in Melbourne, the Protectors had magisterial powers to prosecute settlers for harm inflicted upon Aboriginal people and to

reserve land for Aboriginal communities until such time as they could be assimilated within the new colonial society. In many settlers' eyes, they threatened the entire scheme of colonization upon which the future of Australia, and indeed the British Empire, depended.

"For humanitarians, Indigenous peoples [...] were innocents awaiting salvation through the light of God and instruction in civilization. For many settlers and their sympathisers in Britain, they were inherently savage, incapable of ever being assimilated into a modern, progressive society."



Ultimately the Protectorate failed and the effective punishment of white settlers who murdered aborigines in the act of colonization was never repeated. The extension of colonial frontiers in Queensland and the Northern Territory in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, beyond the colonies in which Protectorates had initially been established, was accomplished with considerable violence and relatively little humanitarian concern.



An engraving of the 1838 Myall Creek Massacre of Aboriginal people at the hands of settlers (Image from 'The Chronicles of Crime' 1841).

recalled not only the initial violence of colonization, but also the ways that it has been perpetuated precisely through the state's authoritarian pursuit of integration. After all, it was only in the 1970s that the policies creating the 'Stolen Generations' of Aboriginal children were phased out. Many of those who experienced the trauma of parental separation then underwent abuse in the institutions to which they were removed.

But it was not just settler opposition that saw to the whittling away of effective humanitarian power. It was also the resistance of Aboriginal communities themselves to a humanitarian civilizing mission, which called for the abandonment of cultures, languages and everyday routines that had endured in Australia for millennia. Although many remnant communities of Aboriginal people in the southern and eastern colonies had adapted to small scale farming on mission and Protectorate stations, they were tenacious in retaining as much autonomy over their lives as possible in these locations. Even in Tasmania, where the Aboriginal population is popularly thought to have been completely destroyed, descendants of Aboriginal women and white sealers and traders lived on as Aboriginal people, determined to preserve what they could of their ancestors' cultures. Others, especially in the northern and western colonies, where there were fewer settlers, still fought to maintain more traditional ways of life. Their struggle continued throughout the twentieth century as the state attempted to enforce assimilation through the fostering of Aboriginal and so-called 'half caste' children to white parents and residential institutions.

These nineteenth century events have been raked over by Australian commentators again and again, especially since the bicentenary of British colonization in 1988. Right wing commentatorshavesoughttodownplayanddiscreditclaims of the violence enacted during colonization, celebrating instead the success of pioneer settlers in launching one of the most advanced economies and societies in the world. Rather perversely given the thrust of the 'civilizing mission', they have blamed humanitarians for fostering policies of Aboriginal separation from 'mainstream' (white) Australia because separate land holdings were reserved. Identifying 'separation' as having failed Aboriginal communities, they advocate more forceful integration. Their critics, labelled by some as 'black armband historians', have persistently

The consequences are still evident, both in a widespread mistrust of the state and in a recurring pattern of family violence among some of those affected.

Since the 1990s, legal processes have been established through which Aboriginal people can claim collective title to land, reversing centuries of denial that they could ever be considered 'owners' of their territory. However, the bar for qualification has been set very high. A continuity not only of occupation, but also of cultural practice on that land has to be established, putting recognition beyond the reach of hundreds of Aboriginal tribes already disappeared, decimated or displaced. Even this move towards recognition of a degree of Aboriginal autonomy within modern Australia, however, has prompted a backlash amongst the most vocal proponents of an assimilationist agenda.

The current 'Intervention' in the Northern Territories, then, may have been prompted by contemporary concerns over alcoholism and child abuse, but it has antecedents located firmly in the conduct of British colonialism and in Australia's place within a broader British Empire. The debates among Britons about that conduct in the early nineteenth century resonate today among Australians, and also among Americans, Canadians and New Zealanders. At the extremes, some call for the respect of Aboriginal autonomy, while others continue to advocate enforced assimilation. What seems to have been overlooked by many, both in the past and the present, and perhaps especially in Australia, is the need for consultation within and among Aboriginal communities. According to all the indices of infant mortality, health, employment and imprisonment they are the most marginalised people in Australia, but they refuse to behave homogeneously, and they decline to enact the role of passive recipients of policy, no matter how much a largely white state would like them to.

# A knight's tale: Australian Conservatism

By Frank Bongiorno

On 26 January 2015, the prime minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, head of a centre-right government in office since September 2013, stood beside a framed photograph of Queen Elizabeth II by the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra to announce that he had awarded a knighthood to her consort, Prince Philip. The incident was a reminder that Abbott had come to federal politics after serving as executive director of Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy. For the London-born Abbott, the son of an English father and Australian mother, Britishness forms the very cultural core of Australian national identity and conservative ideology.



Frank Bongiorno is an Associate Professor of History at the Australian National University. He is the author or co-author of three books and many scholarly articles and book chapters on political and cultural dimensions of Australian history.

Abbott's reintroduction of Australian knights and dames earlier in the year following their abolition in the 1980s had attracted criticism and ridicule in something like equal measure but it was as nothing compared with the decision to bestow such an honour on the Duke of Edinburgh. Even within the coalition he leads, there was almost no one prepared to defend the decision. Indeed, the announcement had the effect of further destabilising Abbott's already fragile leadership. Within a few days, it became clear that there was a group of parliamentarians and ministers within the ruling coalition who thought the decision so bereft of good sense, so anachronistic, and so out-of-touch with the feelings of the overwhelming majority of Australians, that it suggested the prime minister should resign. A poll found that just 12 per cent of voters supported the award.

None of this should have been so surprising. J.R. Nethercote in his *Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* entry on 'Conservatism' commented that 'Australia, as a new nation in terms of European settlement, has not been fertile ground for conservative philosophy or practice' but that '[c]onservative sentiment has been most evident in Imperial links and attachment to British connections and institutions', although

'conservatism has been increasingly tempered by nationalism'.

Nethercote is broadly correct here, although the country does have conservative traditions stretching back into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that he does not acknowledge. While Louis Hartz and Richard Rosecrance presented Australia in *The Founding New Societies* (1964) as a 'radical fragment' of Europe, the early European settlement of Australia that began with the founding of a penal colony in 1788 occurred in the age of conservative counter-revolution. Its early mode of government was autocratic, its policy preoccupied with fostering a state-sponsored landed class, deploying religion in defence of public order, and creating and maintaining social hierarchy. One of the earliest expressions of Australian conservatism was the conviction that social intercourse between the 'free' and the 'freed' – that is to say, ex-convicts – needed to be kept to a minimum, and that the state should be parsimonious in granting either material benefits or civil rights to the emancipated class.

Historians of the emergence of free political institutions in Australia have also shown that conservative ideas contributed to the debate over the colonial constitutions adopted in the 1850s as the basis of self-government. Australian conservatives of the mid-nineteenth century deplored the idea of male suffrage and vote by ballot, equating democracy with anarchy. They preferred tradition over experiment, hierarchy over autonomy. One of the most articulate of the colonial conservatives, James Macarthur, presided over a little community in Camden near Sydney that in its paternalism and hierarchy would have been instantly recognisable to anyone familiar with the English lord of the manor's authority over his estate.



Parliament House, Canberra. Opened in 1988, it replaced the provisional Parliament House building from 1927. The building reflects the distinctive character of the Australian democracy and its historical proximity but geographical distance from Europe.

The colonial politician W.C. Wentworth's proposal for an Australian nobility that would inhabit a colonial House of Lords was derided as a scheme for a 'bunyip aristocracy', yet each colonial parliament nonetheless established an upper house designed to act as a brake on radical democracy. And they largely did so – in some cases for generations. In sum, conservatism was never entirely vanquished.



For about a century from 1860, flamboyant support for the British Empire and the baubles attached to it – such as the imperial honours system – was one of the most important ways that Australia's conservatives signalled their conservatism in a democracy without an established church or landed aristocracy. That no Australian political party called itself 'conservative' signalled the symbolic defensiveness of conservatism.

Australians believed they were pioneering a 'new' country, British in inspiration but offering the enterprising and industrious a better life than available in the 'old' world. To use the term 'conservative' in this context would have been drastically counter-cultural and politically suicidal. But as the historian Cameron Hazlehurst commented in introducing a collection of historical essays on *Australian Conservatism* in 1979, 'neither politically prudent reticence nor the obvious differences between Australia and Great Britain' should be taken as indicating the lack of an Australian conservatism.

With the decline of Australian Britishness from the time of Britain's first failed effort to enter the European Economic Community in the early 1960s, the old imperial anchor became of dubious value to the parties of the centre-right. Some of their members abandoned it only reluctantly. Robert Menzies, the long-serving Anglophile prime minister of Australia, became increasingly disgruntled in his final years in office during the 1960s about the end of the British Commonwealth as an exclusive white club. For about a quarter of a century after his retirement in 1966, the parties of the centre-right – the Liberal Party and its usual partner in government, the Country Party – struggled to articulate an ideology and vision to replace their previous attachment to Britain.

In the years between about 1972 and 1996, national politics in Australia was dominated by the Labor Party, reversing a half-century of conservative hegemony. Labor, too, had identified with Britishness, but in a more measured and qualified way that placed greater emphasis on Australian independence. So where Labor embraced a 'new nationalism' with considerable enthusiasm in the 1970s, the parties



Tony Abbott, the Australian Prime Minister (left), caused a stir when announcing on Australia Day 2015 that Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, would be awarded a knighthood for a long life of duty and service and as a "great servant" of Australia. Abbott had decided in 2014 to restore knights and dames to the honours system, awards that are signed off by the Queen and which allegedly romanticise Britain's relations to Australia through the monarchy.

of the centre-right were more ambivalent, less sure of themselves.

Part of the difficulty the Liberal and Country (later called the National) parties faced was that they had tended to meld liberal and conservative ideologies in ways that made sense in terms of everyday politics, but which contributed to an ideological crisis when two developments came together in the mid-1970s

– the need to forge a post-imperial national identity, and the end of the long post-war economic boom. The initial solution, under Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (1975-83), was to fuse a conservative paternalism wary of disturbing existing practices and institutions, a liberalism that strongly repudiated racial discrimination and embraced multiculturalism, and a revived anti-communism and economic austerity. The Fraser Government was much more Heath than Thatcher; anti-union in rhetoric, but still inclined to treat the union movement as a recognised, if resented estate, rather than an enemy to be humbled. Fraser embraced the Commonwealth, but more as a multilateral, multiracial association that echoed in the wider world the kind of multicultural identity he was promoting at home. It was no longer an expression of antipodean Britishness.

After his government was defeated at the election of March 1983, the centre-right in Australia came to repudiate the Fraser years as an era of missed opportunities and policy failures. Modern Australian conservatism was born in the 1980s out of this sense of failure. It looked to Reagan and Thatcher for inspiration, rather than to its own past which it associated with an excessive level of state intervention in the economy, as well as an unwillingness to challenge rent-seeking vested interests. Through the right-wing think tanks that either revived or commenced operations in the mid-1970s, the ideas associated with public choice theory swept through the whole political and administrative system and had a notable impact on Liberal Party ideology. And the radically free-market, neo-conservative turn of Rupert Murdoch was also significant because of his increasing domination of the Australian media during the 1980s.



The political project of combining conservative and liberal ideological strands had been central to the modern Liberal Party since its foundation in the 1940s. Menzies was the key figure in this project in the mid-twentieth century; he had needed to reconcile the arrival of the Keynesian welfare state with a more traditional emphasis on individual initiative and family self-reliance. But the late twentieth-century iteration of the project was indebted in equal measure to John Howard, who would serve as prime minister for more than eleven years (1996 and 2007), making him the country's second-longest serving prime minister after Menzies.

A key document for understanding the new conservatism, *Future Directions*, appeared at the end of 1988, the bicentenary of European settlement, when Howard was still opposition leader. At the time, Australian federal politics was dominated by the Hawke Labor government in its third term. It had since 1983 combined deregulation of the economy with carefully-targeted social policy spending and cultural nationalism; a 'Third Way' social democracy that foreshadowed, and to some extent inspired, the later Blairite project. *Future Directions*, then, was an effort to define a philosophy for the Australian centre-right, when so much of what it wanted to achieve was already being accomplished by its Labor opponent.

The political failure of *Future Directions* – John Howard would lose the party leadership in 1989 and the coalition the election of 1990 – has obscured the extent to which it articulated most of the key elements of a new balance of conservatism and liberalism in centre-right politics. *Future Directions* advocated a much reduced role for the state in the economy – going even further than Labor in this respect – but it appealed to citizens' insecurity in a time of rapid change, promising to restore a lost structure and order. It emphasised unitary nationalism, parental authority and family values, and it played down multiculturalism. But like the new conservatism elsewhere, it advocated a free-market economic agenda that seemed

likely to increase people's insecurity at the same time as it promised the comfort and certainty of traditional values and morality. 'In time', however, as John Howard recalled in his memoirs, 'it would be seen as the document which foretold much of the philosophical direction of the government I would lead from 1996 ... I believed in every element of *Future Directions*'.

Howard self-consciously fused liberal and conservative traditions, advocating market liberalism (always moderated by electoral opportunism) and a conservative patriotism based on the 'aspirational' values of families and the protection of national borders against external 'threats'. Most famously, Howard successfully fought the 2001 election over the question of asylum-seeker boat arrivals in a climate of public – or at least media – hysteria. An architect of this victory, Lynton Crosby, has subsequently made a career working for Tories and tobacco in Britain. His initial attempt to export the Australian Liberals' xenophobic appeal into British politics met with a rebuff at the 2005 election, but he experienced subsequent success with Boris Johnson in mayoral elections, and he is an adviser to the Conservative Party in the lead-up to the 2015 election.

Howard was a constitutional monarchist who opposed the republic in the 1999 referendum. But there were no knighthoods, for members of the royal family or for anyone else, during his prime ministership, and he has criticised their reintroduction in Australia.

His conservatism was revived by the idea of an Anglosphere that accompanied the war on terror after 9/11, for it allowed Howard to forge a close personal relationship with George W. Bush while simultaneously strengthening relations with the United Kingdom. Howard's ability to seize such opportunities while tying them into Liberal Party tradition, Australian history and the 'the national interest' was a key to his political longevity. Tony Abbott has so far failed to emulate this success; his knight's tale has instead seemed like an anachronistic and self-indulgent creation of a zombie.



John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia between 1996 and 2007 and quintessential to developments in Australian conservative ideology in recent years. "His conservatism was revived by the idea of an Anglosphere that accompanied the war on terror after 9/11, for it allowed Howard to forge a close personal relationship with George W. Bush while simultaneously strengthening relations with the UK."

# The early Australian Labor Party: leading from the front?

By Nick Dyrenfurth

One hundred and twenty four years ago the working people of the Australian colonies created a then unique type of political organisation: a 'Labor' party explicitly supported by trade unionists. One version of Australian Labor's birth holds that the party was formed by striking shearers under the branches of the famed 'Tree Of Knowledge' in the regional Queensland town of Barcaldine during mid-1891; a counter-version asserts that the first Labor saplings burst into life the same year but in the less romantic surrounds of the working-class inner-city Sydney suburb of Balmain.

Whatever their veracity, both stories of Labor's birth testify to the party's broad church nature. From the outset, Labor sought to represent all Australians, whether they dwelled in the city or rural areas ('the bush'), or worked with their head or their hands. Labor has also attracted a diverse range of members, parliamentary representatives, leaders and opponents. The other constant of Labor's history is its links with the union movement. Australian Labor was founded by unionists and unions continue to play a formal role in the party's structure as affiliates, unlike many of their social democratic brethren in Britain and elsewhere on the continent.

The rise of the ALP however cannot be seen in isolation. The party arose at a time when other socialist parties came into existence and its ideological influences and leading activists were drawn from overseas countries, in particular the imperial power that established Australia as a penal colony and later a democratic white-settler society, Britain. From the 1850s following the lead of their British brethren, Australians formed small-scale, city-based 'craft unions' representing skilled and semi-skilled workers in a particular trade. Indeed, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was a



Nick Dyrenfurth is a Lecturer at the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University. He is the author or editor of several books on Australian labour and political history as well as having published widely in leading academic journals. The article draws on his book with Frank Bongiorno, *A Little History of the Australian Labor Party* (2011) as well as his own *Heroes and Villains: the Rise and Fall of the Early Australian Labor Party* (2011).

'branch' of the British union. The influence of the British chartist movement, many of whose members had been transported as convicts, shaped the outlook of early radicals and unionists. Collective identity was likewise expressed by the formation of coalmining lodges. But in an important respect the Australian labour movement deviated from the British experience. In Australia, industries were biased towards primary production such as wool, mining and agriculture, meaning that the Australian working class was more far more rural in nature and less classically proletarian. This would have important repercussions on the ideological nature and electoral appeal of the ALP which tended to be more pragmatic and populist in its outlook, attracting the support of many small-scale farmers. The nation's largest and most influential union, The Australian Workers' Union (AWU), a primarily rural and shearing-based organisation in the manner of industry-wide 'new' unions that emerged in Britain, came to exert a particularly strong sway over the early Labor party, especially in New South Wales.

Early Labor's leading politicians and publicists were often British-born. Two child miners, William Spence, a co-founder of the AWU and Labor politician, and Andrew Fisher, a three-time Prime Minister, were each born in Scotland, while the latter's controversial successor, Billy Hughes, was of Welsh-background but London-born. Henry Boote, arguably the most influential labour movement journalist of his time as editor of the



Chris Watson (1867-1941) served as the third Prime Minister of Australia in 1904. He was the first prime minister from the Australian Labour Party, and the first prime minister from the labour movement in the world. Of Chilean birth, with German and New Zealand ancestry, Watson also reflected the tapestry of different origins that formed Australia.

AWU's *Brisbane Worker* and *Australian Worker* newspapers, hailed from Liverpool, while his predecessor William Lane was born in Bristol. Prominent British unionists and socialists Ben Tillett and Tom Mann, leading figures in the 1889 London Dock strike that Australians workers enthusiastically supported in moral and financial terms, each toured Australia. Mann eventually settled in Melbourne where in the 1900s he played an important role organising for the Victorian Labor Party. Fisher was influenced by and shared a close friendship with British Labour leader Keir Hardie. Most of these early Labor figures, while proud of their Britishness, believed that their movement was helping to create a New World society impossible to replicate in the class-ridden Old World.

Of course Australian and British Labor's founders shared a common goal: to create a more democratic, equal and just society than that which had emerged under free market capitalism. They also shared similar beliefs about how that society would be brought into being: ethical socialism, Fabianism and cooperatives were among the answers. Many early labour activists were more informed by the teachings of Methodism than Marxism. Practically-speaking, 'One person, one vote', compulsory conciliation and arbitration, public ownership of monopolies and old age pensions were just some of the policies Australian Labor proposed in order to bring their vision of 'socialist' society into existence. Yet the party's egalitarian nation-building ethos was limited by its xenophobic nationalism and commitment to the racially discriminatory federal legislation known as White Australia (1901) which saw Chinese and Melanesian labourers repatriated.

Labor's electoral success was extraordinary. In the then colony of Queensland, Andy Dawson, an ex-miner, formed the world's first Labor government during late 1899. Dawson's ministry lasted a mere week but just five years later, and with the Australian colonies having federated into a new nation-state in 1901, Chris Watson, a one-time stable hand and journalist, became prime minister of a minority administration in April 1904, the world's first national Labor government. (Of the comparatively young, self-educated men who made up the first federal Labor caucus of 1901, 13 were overseas-born, including seven Scots). In a move repeated over the years, Labor's opponents formed a coalition in order to slow the progress of what had, in 1908, officially become known as the 'Australian Labor Party'. Unlike its European cousins Labor wore its nationalism as a badge of pride. In 1910, the first Labor Speaker of the House and President of the Senate dispensed with British-style wigs and gowns, while the postmaster-general issued stamps on which, instead of a portrait of King George V, there was a kangaroo on a map of Australia. Yet, all the while, Australian Labor remained firmly supportive of the British Empire.

'That the workers should rule is a thought that rankles in their hearts', announced the Labor-friendly *Worker* newspaper of the party's conservative enemies. More heartache was in store for Labor's opponents. Following a sweeping election victory in April 1910, a former child miner, Andrew Fisher, took charge of the world's first majority Labor government. In the same year, Australians elected Labor state governments in New South Wales and South Australia. When Labor surprisingly lost the 1913 federal election Boote counselled readers of the *Australian Worker* against disappointment: 'We have reached a stage of progress which has no parallel elsewhere on earth. A Labor government here is no longer a wild improbability, but the probable outcome of every appeal.' Whereas the British Labour Party was still little more than a parliamentary rump, barely

distinguishable from the Liberals, and socialist parties in France and Germany remained remote from real power, in Australia the planks of Labor's platform were being made law. No Labor party existed at all in the United States. By 1914, Labor had held office four times federally as well as in every single state.

Prior to its fall, key to Australian Labor's world-leading early achievements was its novel form of union-inspired internal democracy. For the first time, working Australians would select their own parliamentary candidates, help frame policy platforms and coordinate election campaigns through their local branches. Internal democracy was also deemed necessary in parliament. Labor politicians were required to sign a 'pledge' binding them to majority decisions of caucus and, unlike their rivals, were strictly guided by the party's platform, determined collectively at a regular, usually annual conference, where affiliated unions remain formally represented.

During the Great War, however, Labor's forward march was halted. In 1916 the only social democratic party charged with governing the affairs of a wartime nation split over the issue of military conscription for overseas service in aid of the British Empire, leading to the expulsions of Prime Minister Hughes and luminaries such as Spence and Watson. A new generation of more self-consciously Australian activists, often of Irish-Catholic background, emerged to dominate the party. Henceforth, a Labor Party that had shifted to the left of the political spectrum, and more narrowly based on the blue-collar industrial working-class, would be subject to charges from its opponents that it was 'disloyal' to the British Empire and thus to the Australian nation.

Throughout its century-plus history, critics, and even a few supporters, have written off Australian Labor at their own peril. Labor is the only political party to have existed since federation in 1901, enduring through three serious splits, two world wars, a great depression and many other crises. It has influenced and drawn inspiration from Britain during these times, from Gough Whitlam's adaptation of Anthony Crosland's ideas during the 1960s to the pioneering of what became known as the Third Way in the 1980s and 1990s governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. As Australian Labor prepares to celebrate its 125th birthday some of the problems Labor and other social democratic parties presently confronts are unprecedented. Others recall the challenges of the past. One lesson from Labor's history is very clear. The party's ability to renew itself in order to form governments of a reformist bent for another century and more will not be possible without the commitment of thousands of ordinary working men and women who have made the Labor cause their own. It will be task of renewal not undertaken in antipodean isolation.



# A flagging relationship?

By Tony Burton

Look up at the Australian flag and one thing is immediately obvious. Almost as far away from Britain as it's possible to get (there's always New Zealand) the flags of both ANZAC countries proclaim some kind of relationship with the United Kingdom. Indeed, as famously quipped by the American comedian Jerry Seinfeld the six silver stars on the Australian flag suggest "Britain at night."



Tony Burton is Secretary of Flags Australia and Editor of the journal *Crux Australis*. Flags Australia is the operating name of the Flag Society of Australia Inc, which is a not-for-profit incorporated association that brings together individuals interested in researching, preserving and publishing information on Australian and international flags.

Seinfeld's was a reasonable reaction. The Australian flag reveals a dynamism of design open to various interpretations. For many Australians, one such might be relief that Mother Britain is still there (or even here, the evidence our institutions and values). The opposite reaction might be horror or suspicion that an adult son, yet to find a compatible partner in the neighbourhood, is still living with his mother, especially when there is doubt that Mother (and even Ma'am) is enthused by such enduring domestic devotion. Either way, the symbol suggests dependence (and something about the national psyche?)

Of course, perceptions of this kind might apply to any of the half dozen national flags with the Union Jack as their heraldic primary, but in Australia's case – a huge country, of influence beyond that often realised – the apparent anomaly is even more remarkable.

A seventh similar flag is even odder. Hawaii – never a British possession at all, and formerly independent – has retained the flag of its historic indigenous monarchy, despite its status since 1898 as part of the USA, a republic. A further irony is that the Hawaiian flag derived from a goodwill gift of a Union Jack by British navigator and explorer George Vancouver to rising star Kamehameha, who made canny use of it in bringing the islands under his sway. The Australian flag on the other hand, a later rendition of ensigns of the local cluster of colonies, is the ultimate product of no such good-will. British Australia began as a penal colony in a supposedly empty wilderness, and ironically again, for fleets of boat-people and adventurers uninvited.

Despite its unpromising start as a *de facto* detention centre for people the British authorities wished to remove as far as possible from the British mainland, European

Australia was praised at the end of its first century for having achieved a society enjoying some degree of equality. The Australians had achieved "*socialisme sans doctrine*" as the French writer Albert Métin argued in his book of that name published in 1901.

In that very climate of social innovation the current Australian flag was selected from more than 32,000 suggestions entered in a public competition the same year. The result was far from innovative: the selection panel was committed to adopting a design conforming to imperial flag usage, as established in 1867.

It is in this sense that it is accurate to say that the Australian flag was imposed, rather than freely or directly chosen by the people. Even a popular unofficial flag long used in eastern Australia and adapted as that of the Federation movement (and despite its Union Jack) was in 1884 deemed too different from colonial usage, and banned from use at sea.<sup>5</sup> Although Prime Minister Edmund Barton recommended this flag as an option (on grounds of local usage), and despite formal protests at the time from the Australian Natives Association that the blue and red ensigns chosen instead were "too British," the older Federation flag was again dismissed in London. Prominent in celebrations at Federation, its use disappeared during the First World War, as a different sort of patriotism was promoted by a government eager to send more troops to fight for God, King and Country (i.e. the Empire).

For most of the ensuing century, Australians were officially considered to be of "British" nationality, an identity directly linked with the monarchy, since all citizens of the Empire were British "subjects", a point Australian passports asserted well into the 1960s. Conservative Governments throughout the 1950s and until 1972 sponsored a "Bring Out A Briton" drive as the mainstay of its immigration program. Many came. In a referendum even now, voters in such pockets of Little Britain as the satellite city of Elizabeth north of Adelaide are unlikely to support changing the flag.

For its period and given the restrictions set by the imperial requirements, the Australian flag is arguably rather neat. Even if based on the ensign template for all the colonies, its design is a brilliant compromise, and if nothing else in current Australian society, the flag alone seems to say we

are in lock-step with Britain. That, however, also means that the flag can be seen as an anachronism – and indeed a target in a world where terrorism has become part of the daily landscape.



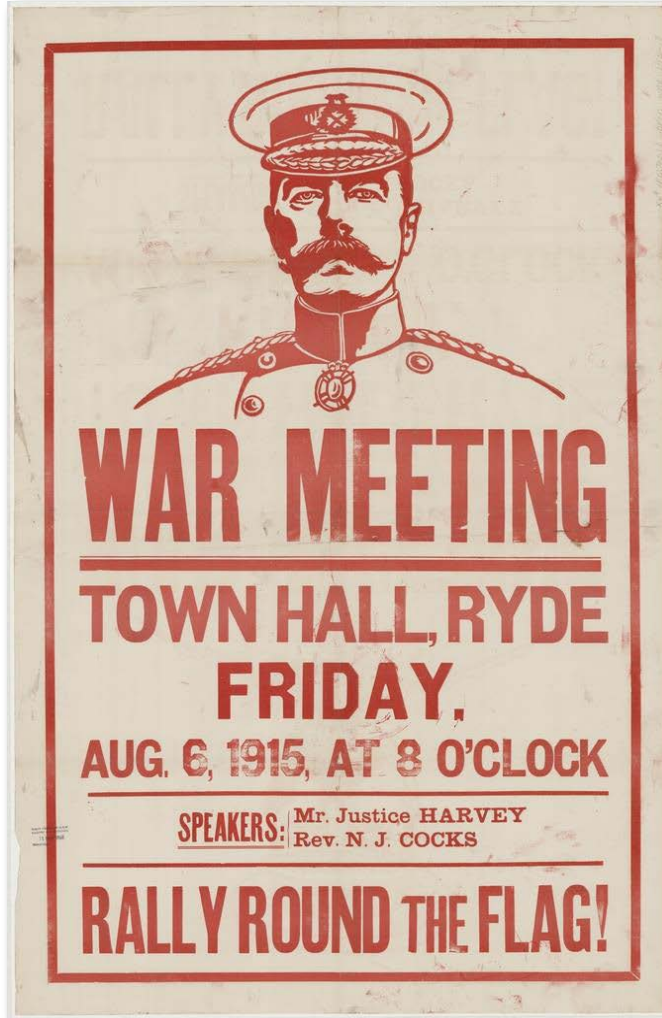
Left: The (unofficial) NSW or Australian Ensign 1832-1898, rejected by Colonial Office London in 1884. Right: The NSW Ensign adapted and adopted as the flag of Federation in 1898. Rejected by Colonial Office London in 1902, citing the 1884 precedent.

Official diffidence in encouraging or even testing other flag design possibilities is striking. Perhaps political leaders now share an irrational and underground foreboding that the comforts of nationhood as known will be swamped by other cultures just as exotic as those British were to the First People, and which may underlie the resurgent cultivation of the ANZAC legend as if that were the cardinal myth of nationhood.

If Australians ever get to vote on their inherited flag in a referendum (as New Zealand will before 20 September 2017), it would have to be on the back of a stronger sense of cohesion in the face of multicultural pressures, including an accepted resolution of those Aboriginal.

Australian governments, like the people, are rarely radical. This conservatism is not surprising given the dominance of British institutions and British imports adding to (or subtracting from) the local political talent pool. Former prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies, 16 years in office (1949 to 1966), proudly proclaimed he was "British to his bootstraps"; while his predecessor Billy Hughes (albeit Welsh) did Australia no credit in seeking more cannon fodder in 1916-17 and by his parochial and imperial obsessions at Versailles. There have been few star performers or real leaders since, even to the present mediocrity, slogans pretending to be policy, and policy the reverse of promises. The flag, whatever its design, should not be mis-used for jingo-jacking, as happened at Cronulla beach in 2005, or as the plaything of electoral opportunism. If over-used in this way, the national flag will become a symbol of division.

In this context, what passes for debate about the flag in its partisanship is nothing of the kind. As in the Canadian case, and probably will be in New Zealand, prejudice, paranoia and propaganda keep both sides in their trenches, while alternative design suggested over 35 years have failed to gain traction – a possible, though not primary, reason why it may be difficult to change the flag – except by leadership or diktat (the latter alien to the Australian



One of many post-Anzac recruitment posters calling for public meetings. Note the ambiguity about the 'Flag' round which loyal citizens were expected to Rally – the Union Jack (Kitchener's) or the relatively new Australian ensign – and the blue or the red? At the time this would not have even been a question, as Australians were unquestionably considered to belong to the 'British nation' – a vague concept but definitely white.

character). However the real obstacle remains that of a oddly nebulous sense of national identity, unlike the many European nations that won their emancipation from empires and foreign occupation.

The current Australian flag is not unreasonably defended as a sign of values that all who want to live here should learn and apply – a message only strengthened by the desperate atrocities of counterfeit caliphates. As if there are no civic values as solid, stolid and relevant as those evolved over centuries of trial and error in the Misty Isles. The hot blood of the Celts, the stuff of legends, like sagas everywhere, is all very well, and the apocalypses of this early century have demonstrated the depths that despots will plumb. Like their British counterparts, mainstream Australians want no part of fanatical fancies and for this reason may be reluctant to fiddle with the flag – or with a republican alternative to the sedate pageantry and stability that

suitably reticent Royals represent.

Apart from the association of the national flag with military sagas – such as ANZAC (and the liturgies of civic religion that have been sanctioned around it), one of the furrphies still fostered about the Australian flag is that it and the constitutional order of monarchy are inseparable, any change in national symbols tantamount to destruction of all the solid civic values on which stability is based.

A republic probably does entail a new flag (though it didn't in Hawaii), but a new flag does not mean a republic. The muddled thinking, and what I have described elsewhere as a national neurosis, is exposed by the indigenous monarchies of the Commonwealth, each with distinctive flags, none of them with the Union Jack. Canada changed its flag, yet remains a monarchy (and the British one at that). Even so, the Australian flag seems an anomaly if 48 or the current 53 members of the Commonwealth have understood and acted on the nation-building utility of adopting distinctive flags. None of these flags in any way demean or diminish Britain.



Even if Australia's were left the last ensign of its kind standing, the admiration society implied in the radiance of one flag reflected in that of the other ensures that it is still not distinctive in the way those of the other Commonwealth nations are. Unless of course Australians secretly want to be British - which, apart from a few diehards, or eccentrics, is doubtful. Imitation may be the highest form of flattery. However, a mutual admiration society is not a healthy relationship. Flattery is not respect. It is not even self-respect.

However puzzling (and not least to the Palace) the debate over the Australian flag is part of a wider quest for national identity in a supra-national world. National identity cannot be created out of concocted nationalism, nor real patriotism defined as flag-waving. Soundly-based national identity requires an end to xenophobia and attendant scapegoating discerned in Australia's history since European settlement for too long, of Aboriginal people and their descendants, yet to attain full equality in the opportunities of citizenship rather than regarded as exotica.

This article has referred to the Hawaiian flag, a design anachronism of its own. Ironically, the Hawaiian instance, if not exactly its flag, is relevant as a forecast of Australia's further evolution as the experimental state it has always been - and so far, a fairly successful one. As a



No doubt at all under which flag Australians were called to serve in the 'Great War' and no doubt of which 'volk', missing the unconscious irony that the Germans were of the same 'race'.

nation of mainly city-dwellers, Australians will most likely become more cosmopolitan than already and evolve as a Hawaiian-type society, either under its similar national flag or some other design that may eventually win acceptance. Either way it may in the end not really matter that the Hawaiians or the Australians keep a relic of their history as their chief local symbol; the former Polynesian kingdom has evolved socially and so will Australia as most likely an Austronesian nation. That said, in the current era and order of nation-states, a distinctive flag is probably a better way of promoting this process than one perceived as a colonial anachronism.

The Australian flag is unlikely to change any time soon, mostly for political reasons and popular reluctance. The local catalyst for change may in the end not be Britain,

nor identification of national well-being with a foreign monarchy, but the decision reached in the New Zealand referendum.

Until then, and absent any unforeseen but galvanising event, the Australian flag before anything else will continue to proclaim, to the confusion of some overseas, and the comfort of many at home, (or even vice-versa) an association of some kind with Britain.

## Membership 2015

Membership in BPS is open to all individuals and institutions with an interest in British politics, society, language, and culture. As a member, you receive subscription to four editions of *British Politics Review*, invitation to all events organised by the society and the right to vote at our annual general meeting.

Your membership comes into force as soon as the membership fee, 100 NOK for 2015, has been registered at our account <6094.05.67788> (please make sure to mark your payment with your full name). If you have questions about membership, please do not hesitate to contact us by e-mail at [mail@britishpoliticssociety.no](mailto:mail@britishpoliticssociety.no)

## Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

The general election of 2010 reintroduced coalition government to Britain, and despite what was predicted by many at the time, the coalition survived the parliamentary term. The general election of 2015 looks to become no less exiting.

While the two main parties both struggle to

garner sufficient support for a parliamentary majority, there is not only the Liberal Democrats that seek to challenge their hegemony, but UKIP, the Green Party and (within the bounds of Scotland) the Scottish National Party as well.

The result is unpredictable not only in terms of which party

will form a government, but whose support it will depend upon.

What are that incumbent government's achievements, which issues are at stake on 7 May and what is likely to follow thereafter?

The spring edition of *British Politics Review* is due to arrive in April 2015.